

Five Days in Northern France in 1977

By Dr. C. J. LUCKENS*

The weather conditions could hardly have been less promising on June 20th when Dr. T. W. Tolman and I boarded the cross channel ferry at Dover intending a few days butterfly hunting in Northern France. Cold north winds and leaden skies had prevailed for two weeks, and there was no sign of alleviation, although we constantly tried to convince ourselves that the clouds were lighter over the French coast. We had discussed the expedition at length and in view of the short time available had a very rigid schedule, our main areas of interest being a small stretch of unspoilt calcareous downland near Reims and the Forêt de Compiègne.

Since the weather remained indefatigably bleak on the other side, we decided the downland ought at least to produce some butterflies at rest, and so we spent most of the first day driving to Reims. In the late afternoon, however, the sun came out for a short time just as we approached Compiègne and we got out to stretch our legs beside a piece of rough ground just outside the town. As we walked through the long grass our first French butterflies flipped up from rest. Nothing spectacular — *Polyommatus icarus* Rott., *Aricia agestis* D. & S., *Cupido minimus* Fuess. and *Coenonympha pamphilus* L., but at least they were prepared to fly!

After spending the night outside Reims, we lost no time in getting to the small area selected for operations, a stretch of rough chalk grassland in total extent about five acres, surrounded by trees and cultivated fields. The first butterfly flushed out of the grass was *Lycaeides agyrognum* Rev., which proved to be fairly common here, though most specimens flew rather reluctantly in the persistent dull conditions. The dominant species, however, was definitely *Coenonympha arcania* L., which was about in plenty, and fresh *Melanargia galathea* L. Later on, there were some brief spells of hazy sunlight, and during this time worn singletons of *Maculinea arion* L. and *Philotes baton* Berg. were netted for identification and we each retained a female *Colias australis* Ver. for breeding. A single female *Leptidea sinapis* L. was also recorded and we were pleased to take two fresh *Coenonympha glycerion* Bork. in the long grass at the lower edge of the short hillside. Throughout the afternoon the mellow fluting of a Golden Oriole coming from the thick scrub provided delightful background music.

Scattered everywhere over the chalk turf were Late Spider Orchids — local and rare plants in Britain. The other orchid so scarce in Britain but relatively common just a few critical miles across the Channel, was the "Lizard". We found this incredible looking plant in several places, including a *terrain militaire* which we explored (probably illegally) near Mourmelon that evening. Here, several *C. glycerion* were disturbed from the long grass and we also saw one or two *P. icarus*.

We returned to the same site the following morning, June 22nd, and found it also held *Plebejus argus* L. and *L. agyrog-*

* 52 Thorold Road, Bitterne Park, Southampton, SO2 4JG.

nomon, generally rather fresher here than on the Reims hillside. We called in at the latter locality later on, but the sun which had shone at intervals through the early morning, retired for the rest of the day. Another *M. arion*, which turned out to be ab. *alconides* Aur., and a fresh female *Philotes baton* were found however.

A party of French schoolchildren appeared on the scene for a short time, and immediately offered enthusiastic assistance — every Marbled White drifting up from the grass was greeted by an excited chorus of "Monsieur, Monsieur, il y a un papillon".

Just before we left, a partially stripped willow bush caught my eye and on it were five full-grown larvae of *Nymphalis polychloros* L. The rest of the brood had presumably pupated. The first thing that I noticed on inspecting the bush, before even finding the larvae, was the neat cuff of hatched ova around one of the terminal twigs. Incidentally, only one of these five larvae proved unparasitised, the rest producing the typical pupae of *Tachinid* flies.

We spent the night outside Compiègne, and early the following morning started to explore the huge State Forest. We had been directed by Mr. Alan Palmer of the British Museum to several areas for *Euphydryas maturna* L. and *Limenitis populi* L., two species which we particularly wanted to find, but in spite of these directions and the fact that this was the first really sunny day of our stay, the Forêt de Compiègne seemed almost totally devoid of butterflies. In fact we saw only one *Pararge aegeria* L. and two or three *pamphilus* all day.

We encountered a group of wild boar in the centre of the forest and were rather glad that we were in the car at the time.

During the afternoon we stopped beside a large disused quarry on the edge of this immense wooded area and here there was an abundance of *Lysandra bellargus* Rott. and *P. icarus* with a number of *C. australis* careering over the rough ground. All six of the female *Colias* that we brought back for breeding from various localities produced typical larvae of *C. australis*, but one of the males captured here is, I am fairly sure, *Colias hyale* L.

Since our return ferry left at 1 p.m. on the 24th, we decided to drive north and spend the night nearer Boulogne. We stopped at Aumale in Picardy, having noticed an interesting stretch of downland where we decided to spend a couple of hours the following morning before driving on to the ferry. We arrived at the flowery hillside at about 8.45 a.m. in bright sunshine and already *arcania*, *icarus* and *bellargus* were on the wing. After a while a few *C. australis* were captured, fluttering like Whites over the *hippocrepis* and *coronilla*, until they really woke up at around 10 a.m., and then netting them was a different matter altogether as they dashed around at high speed. It was nearly time to leave when Dr. Tolman called out that he had netted a *Fritillary*. This turned out to

be a large fresh female *Melitaea phoebe* Schiff. We delayed our departure for another half an hour and along with a worn female *Melitaea cinxia* L. found several more of this Fritillary — mostly males and all in mint condition. Incidentally, Picardy seems out of the distribution area of *M. phoebe* according to the map in the Higgins and Riley field guide. The fact that we missed our scheduled ferry was a small price to pay for this unexpected last minute bonus.

References

- Fitter, R., Fitter, A. and Blamey, M. 1974. *The Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe*. Collins.
Higgins, L. G. and Riley, N. D. 1970. *A Field Guide to the Butterflies of Britain and Europe*. Collins.

TRACHYPHLOEUS BIFOVEOLATUS BECK (COL.: CURCULIONIDAE) SWARMING UNDER A STREET LAMP; WITH A NOTE ON ITS VARIATION. — Further to my recent report (1977, *Ent. Rec.*, 89: 340) of finding numbers of the weevil *Otiorhynchus ligneus* Ol. gathered upon a low wall under a street lamp near here one night last August, I have now to note a similar but still larger assemblage of another flightless ground weevil, namely *Trachyploeus bifoveolatus* Beck (= *scaber* L.), under the same lamp on the night of 16th October. The night was rather misty and damp, but scarcely warm, and at a rough estimate somewhere between 50 and 70 weevils, possibly many more, must have been present. As before, the top of the wall was most frequented by them, but on this occasion the lamp standard too carried a good number, and even some metal railings to one side of it had their quota. The species is a common one in this district in suitable places on light soils, especially in heathy localities at roots of sheep's sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) with *T. scabriculus* L. However, to encounter it in abundance in such an unlikely spot, and in such unusual circumstances, is certainly remarkable.

T. bifoveolatus exhibits a wide range of variation in the colour-tone of its clothing of scales—a fact barely mentioned in our standard works. This variation is clearly edaphic, i.e., correlated with the substrate on which the beetles live; thus, on sand or gravel they tend to be ochreous-brown, on chalk grey-white, on red sandstone brick-red, and on dark humus-rich soils, fuscous. At least on the latter type of substrate, fresh and unabraded examples—as in some other species, notably *scabriculus* L. *laticollis* Boh.—have a characteristic pattern on the elytra, which in *bifoveolatus* consists of a well-marked interstitial tessellation. The breadth of the body and degree of rounding of the elytral sides also varies considerably, but the broader forms (var. *angustisetulus* V. Hansen) seem much commoner with us than the narrower ones (nominotypical), whereas the reverse is the case in mid-Europe. — A. A. ALLEN, 49 Montcalm Road, Charlton, London, SE7 8QG.